

HIS INHERITANCE

By HENRY NORMANBY.

A powerful story, in which Destiny, remorseless and inevitable, disposes of human lives with as little compunction as though they were pawns on a chessboard.



WE were talking, Ereault and I, in the club smoking-room, on the fate which comes to some men without any seeking on their part—nay, against their every wish and inclination; and as we gave this or that instance in support of or against the argument, De Courcy, leaning back in his chair, and with his feet upon the table, joined in the discussion. We always welcomed De Courcy's stories, he told them so well—in fact, he really did not appear to tell them in the ordinary sense at all. It was more like a reading from a fine book. Scanlan took it down verbatim, and preserved it to posterity.

"Some fellows," said De Courcy, "have had luck from the start. Take the case of Ascoyne," he instanced tentatively, and looked round the group to see if we knew the name. We waited in confident expectancy while he lit his pipe.

"I tell the story," he went on, "precisely as it was told to me, adding nothing and taking nothing away; any addition would be superfluous, and the greatest subtraction would not lessen the magnitude of the thing that befell. He on whom the hand of Fate rested so heavily no longer feels the pressure of that hand. To him the judgment of the world is of no moment whatever." Here De Courcy took his feet from the table and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. As he unfolded the story his voice became singularly sweet and impressive.

"It was my privilege to be his friend for many years, and he was at all times equally mine. I knew, as I thought, much of him. God help us! Does anyone know anything of anybody? His tastes were remarkably refined and his disposition one of the sweetest I have ever met. He had—just remember this—a magnificent abhorrence of cruelty. I once saw him give an excellent thrashing to a man who was beating a donkey. I want you to remember this because it's just the point of the whole argument that our sins are merely lent us, we use them as occasion requires, and then pass them on.

"Well, about Ascoyne"; and again De Courcy's voice softened and became sweeter; "at college we called him the 'Saint,' for no one ever saw him out of temper or heard him make an impatient remark. Of

course, he took his degree, but never troubled to have it conferred; and eventually, as most of us have and the rest of us will, we drifted apart, and didn't meet again for years. Just about 300 years had gone by before I again set eyes on him. Oh, it's all right, I mean exactly what I say.

"Violent deeds and violent deaths seem to have been the grim birth-right of his family, as far back as we can trace. The family name figures in history, and always in the chronicles of crime. One ancestor, with a quaint taste for psychology, seems to have speculated concerning this constant perversion of every moral sense. He wrote (in Latin): 'It is a strange truth that, from all I can learn, no one who bears the name of Ascoyne is capable of any good deed. I take no pride in including myself.' (He, it appears, was hanged for forgery.) The family records show that no member of it, save one, ever died in his bed. The notable exception was the third son of the ancestor aforesaid, who died as the effect of a broken skull gained in a low drunken debauch. The sheriff was on his way to arrest him for horse-stealing, when he thus unmannerly eluded the grip of the law. One may judge, therefore, what blood it was that flowed through the veins of him whose story I tell.

"He was born in the Home of the Sad Sisters, an asylum for the insane, whither his mother had been sent on becoming demented at the death of her husband, who was hanged for murder. Neither of these sombre facts was ever known to the hapless mortal who came into the world to such heralding. The mother laid violent hands on the child, and would have strangled it but for the timely—or untimely—intervention of an attendant, who took it from her amid maniacal ravings. That same night she accomplished her own destruction by cutting her throat with a piece of glass which she obtained by breaking her medicine bottle. The child was subsequently adopted and sent to England to be educated.

"He had an intense aversion to the physically unfit, an aversion which was perhaps accentuated by his own almost complete perfection in the matter of appearance. This also was the finest of the many good qualities possessed by his wife—a physical beauty which positively assuaged one's humours and gave a broad beneficence to the whole scheme of Nature.

"That the offspring of such a sumptuous pair should also be beautiful and perfect was, of course, not only to be expected, but was demanded as a right—the proper tribute due to the excellence of the parents. He was, if possible, more conscious of this than were we, so that one may easily imagine how great was the shock of his discovery that the child was entirely blind.

"Simultaneously with that conviction came the determination to keep the appalling fact from the knowledge of his wife. She certainly had not the slightest suspicion of it, and it was perfectly easy during the first few weeks of the infant's life to keep her in this comfortable ignorance; but as the demands of the child became more pronounced and imperative, and its need of adequate expression became stronger, the danger of the disability becoming apparent grew greater, and the fine task of shielding her correspondingly increased.

"To Ascoyne it was simply terrific that the boy was imperfect; he considered the imperfection more of a reproach to himself than a calamity to the child. That a son of his might some time walk lamely through the world seemed sufficiently detestable, but that the light of the sun should be for ever withheld from him was incredible—absolutely too monstrous for belief.

"He tried to estimate the magnitude of the loss, closing his eyes for long periods in broad daylight, endeavouring to imagine the deprivation, how it would affect *him*, to present to the world an absolute negation of the supremest sense. To feel its warmth, yet never see the splendour of the rising sun; to be conscious of its presence, yet never note the beauty of an April shower; to hear the music of the streamlet, yet never know its sparkling radiance; to breathe its perfume, yet never see the dewdrop sleeping on the bosom of the rose; to listen to the wind upon the waters, yet never watch the argosy come greatly home; to feel her breath upon his cheek, yet never dream in the smile of his mother's eyes."

Here De Courcy paused to light his pipe, and the rest of us filled ours. We drew our chairs closer, and a deeper hush came upon us as the teller of the tale went on.

"You remember that storm we had in '87. I was in Genoa with Flanley, quite out of it, thank God! Well, it broke over Cray, where Ascoyne was living, about three in the afternoon. His wife was away; she had been ill for some months, and the child was being looked after by a nurse. Of course, it was impossible any longer to conceal the fact of its blindness, and the mother was returning that day.

"Ascoyne, it appears, had spent the night walking about his room, endeavouring, no doubt, to find some way of still withholding the terrible fact from her. The nurse had discovered it for herself long since. I don't know whether there is anything especially malign in thunder, or why it is invariably the accompaniment of hellish manifestations. It may be that, in this case, it just supplied the final strain which destroyed the fine fabric of a noble mind. You can figure it out for yourselves, but this was what happened: the storm came up at daybreak, if a day without any sun can break at all. The clouds lay along the sky like a pall, for Nature keeps time to great measures, and clothes herself fitly for the parts she plays.

"Ascoyne, as I have said, had walked his room all night to the accompaniment of thoughts which God alone knew—the outcome of them all men know. For hours he watched the storm-clouds gather, until at length, probably from sheer exhaustion, he lay down on the couch in his study. Immediately over it, hanging on the wall, was a Sicilian dagger which had been handed down in his family for generations—there's a curious story about it, but I'll tell you that some other time. It was a long, bright, devilish-looking weapon, which reflected the firelight in crisp flashes; in fact, it was the only thing that showed clearly in the room, for the hangings, books, and furniture were all sombre in the extreme.

"Well, Ascoyne was lying on the couch, looking up at that cursed bright thing on the wall. It probably spoke to him, and louder than the seventeenth devil of Riot; possibly it whispered like the first murmur of

love to a lonely heart, mayhap it did neither—I don't know. This I most horribly know. Ascoyne rose from the couch and took down the dagger; he tried the edges of it on his thumb, and tentatively rested the point against his throat. These tests being satisfactory, he went straight to the nursery in search of the child. The nurse, alarmed at the sinister aspect of things, had forsaken the infant and gone off to chatter with a neighbour. There was no light anywhere, and the air was as still as death. He took the infant from its bed and made his way down the stairs and out into the garden, which terminated in a dense pine wood. Right to the centre of this wood went the man, groping his way through the intense darkness. The child, whose blindness made it unafraid, uttered not a sound.

"Meanwhile, the storm-clouds had culminated in one pitch-black mass, yet not a drop of rain had fallen, and the air, heavy with the scent of the pines, was silent and motionless."

De Courcy stopped and knocked the ashes out of his pipe; then, as he showed no intention of going on again, Hildred asked, "Well, what happened?" and De Courcy, genuinely surprised, said, "Oh, of course, you want to hear the end of it. I thought you would probably guess. Well, the dampness or coldness or something else made the child cry, and Ascoyne hushed it to sleep in his arms. When it was sleeping quite peacefully, he laid it down in a soft nest of pine-needles, and then, without any hesitation, he raised his hand to strike at it with the dagger. . . .

"At that moment the storm broke—you remember the peculiarity of it, there was only one lightning flash, and only one peal of thunder.

"The lightning shattered the pine-tree which sheltered the child, flashed along the blade of the upraised dagger, and vanished into space. The darkness that followed was even intenser than before, so intense that Ascoyne could not distinguish the child nor the trees—could not see his own hands.

"He probably fainted, for it was evening when his wife, coming home through the familiar wood, almost fell over his body, the child sleeping quietly by his side. He wasn't dead, and answered her at once.

"'I'm all right, you know, but how did you come here? And how can we get home in the dark?'

"'Dark?' she answered wonderingly; 'it isn't dark, it's quite light.'

"The truth came upon him more quickly than his blindness, but the fine nature that was his, despite his ancestors, sought to save his wife.

"'Yes, so it is,' he said; 'I—I'm not quite well. I've been asleep, I think—'

"She had lifted the child, who clung to her neck and gazed about in an intensity of wonder. There was no doubt that it saw clearly. Of course I went to see Ascoyne directly I heard of what had happened. His wife took me to the nursery, and showed me the child turning over the leaves of a picture-book.

"'It seems absurd, doesn't it?' she said to me with a smile; 'but, do you know, I more than once imagined the boy was blind!'